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Keeping abreast of breastfeeding

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Opinion Column

With all the advantages of breastfeeding, it's long past time for workplaces to accommodate nursing moms

Keeping abreast of breastfeeding

Erika Simpson, Special to Postmedia Network

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A mother displays a placard as she breastfeeds her child in Metro Manila on Aug. 1. A mass public breastfeeding was organized in several cities around the world in support of World Breastfeeding Week (Reuters/ Erik De Castro).

World Breastfeeding Week, which was marked this week, calls for more mass awareness of the right of working women to combine breastfeeding and work.

Whether they work in formal or home settings, women need mother-friendly workplaces and employers. After all, breastfeeding is the best start we can give babies. The 1990 Innocenti Declaration stated breastfeeding provides ideal nutrition for infants and contributes to their health.

But not everyone is aware of the impediments mothers face, especially if they want to continue breastfeeding at work.

Breastfeeding is convenient, healthy and natural. Mothers do not have to find kitchens to boil water, sterilize bottles and heat formula.

Breastfeeding also makes it easier to take babies everywhere. Breast milk is always with you, so going to work or travelling with your baby is simpler.

But taking an active toddler to workplaces or breastfeeding while seated in tight spaces, such as planes, can be a real challenge. Most workplaces do not provide private nursing areas.

I recall a seldom-seen rocking chair for nursing mothers in the UN General Assembly's bathroom. And I also recall perching on a toilet in a cubicle at NATO headquarters.

A lucky few mothers have day-care facilities at work or school, so they can breastfeed during their lunch breaks.

So many mothers falsely assume they must wean their child as soon as they return to work or school. But toddlers can have all the benefits of breast milk even after their mother's leave of absence is over. Mothers can use a breast pump and milk can be frozen for later use.

Despite the general lack of awareness, facilities and support, fighting for the right to breastfeed at work is worth the effort because of the extensive advantages that breastfeeding offers.

For one, it's easier on young parents' budgets as they don't need to pay for formula and bottles. Their extra expenses are the extra calories mothers must consume to produce milk.

But even when the cost of the extra food mothers eat to give their body more nutrients is taken into account, breastfeeding costs far less than formula, which average about \$2,200 for one year.

Breastfeeding also helps mothers lose weight, and regain their confidence at work, because it uses up extra fat stored in their bodies during pregnancy. While mothers should eat at least an extra 500 calories a day to produce the milk, their bodies use 1,000 calories to produce one litre of milk, so breastfeeding usually produces a slow, steady weight loss of one kilogram a month. After six months of breastfeeding, mothers can lose the weight they may have gained during pregnancy.

Older generations sometimes remark that bottle feeding allows a mother's partner to take a greater role in parenting and give the mother more uninterrupted sleep. But babies need hours of attention other than feeding, so there are lots of other opportunities for the partner to interact with the baby. Plus, it seems that breastfeeding mothers function better with less

sleep, perhaps due to the hormones breastfeeding releases.

Often it is easier for new moms to sleep with their babies separately from their partners, and the family bed — in which parents and young children sleep together — is yet another solution people are becoming less reticent to talk about.

If anyone asks why women continue to breastfeed older babies who eat solids, they need to know the World Health Organization recommends weaning children when they are two years old. Many mothers breastfeed for three years. This may seem daunting when they first give birth, but the time goes by quickly.

If they can keep up their breastfeeding for at least six months, they are helping their baby's long-term health immeasurably.

It appears breastfed babies have lower incidences of acute ear infections and diarrhea. Some studies show breastfed babies, compared to formula-fed babies, have 19% lower incidences of otitis media, 80% lower incidences of prolonged otitis media and 50% lower diarrheal illnesses. Fewer visits to the doctor and days off due to illnesses pay off for everyone.

Further, women who have breastfed for at least two weeks have a 13% less likelihood of breast cancer, and those who have breastfed for at least two years are 61% less likely to develop breast cancer.

Some mothers forego breastfeeding because they want to drink alcohol after work and party on the weekend. According to the La Leche League, a worldwide organization that promotes breastfeeding, the effect of alcohol on breastfeeding babies is directly related to the amount mothers ingest. When a breastfeeding mother drinks occasionally or limits her consumption to one drink or less per day, the amount of alcohol her baby receives has not been proven to be harmful. As is the case with most pharmaceutical drugs, very little alcohol comes out in the milk. The mother can pump beforehand, drink reasonable amounts of alcohol, and continue breastfeeding as she normally does. The false assumption that wine, beer and coffee are all prohibited makes the future look unnecessarily restrictive for nursing mothers.

As any parent learns who tries to work from home or go on an outing knows, one moment your one year old is happy and the next she is wailing over nothing. Often the best way to handle your toddler is to nurse her while you are writing emails, taking conference calls or sitting in your car.

— Erika Simpson is the past vice-chair of Canadian Pugwash Group on Science and World Affairs, vice-president of the Canadian Peace Research Association, and an associate professor of international relations in the department of political science at Western University.